

Red Coat, the Goldfields Postman (John Graham)

By JANET C. ANGUS

"I think interest in one's lineage comes late in life," writes some would-be historian in "The Press" (31/1/1972). "This is unfortunate because as all the older relations die off you have to dig for information."

I have certainly had to "dig" to discover facts about the life of John Graham, my Great-Grandmother's youngest brother, but I have felt on occasions that it has been more like opening a cupboard door on the family skeleton. My grandmother and her brother and sisters seem to have been kept quite away from the notorious Jock. My great uncle Andrew Hunter leaves this account. John Graham was the youngest son of my grandfather who died in 1856 leaving the four members of his family £500 each. With his £500 John Graham got married and started farming. The farm was put in his wife's name but there was nothing but quarrels between them, and his wife turned him off the farm. He always had a grudge against the world after that date.

"The aunt I lived with did not speak to him and I do not know the reason. I saw and spoke to him only once — when I went with my eldest brother to see him. He struck me as being a very intelligent man and the only thing against him was that he was a great faddist on the political questions of the day."

Jock Graham or Red Coat, the Goldfield's Postman, political agitator, writer and bookseller, certainly did some scandalous things, but I have reached the conclusion that he was a relative to be proud of because of his enterprise, his energy, his lively mind and continued good spirits. And now for his life story, or rather as much of it as I have had time to "dig" up!

He was born in 1817 in Glasgow a nephew of Dr Graham of Killean, one time moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He came to Otago on the emigrant ship Columbus in 1852 with his sister Miss Matilda Graham and his sister and brother-in-law Mr and Mrs James Hunter and their baby daughter Catherine (my grandmother). Another brother, Thomas Graham, remained in Scotland. Jock worked on the Hunter's farm "Kelvin Grove" in North-East Valley until the end of 1856 when he agreed to carry a weekly mail for £150 per annum as far as the Clutha, the money to be raised by subscription from the settlers along the line of road, there being no public funds. "Jock was quite a character," says Dr Hocken, "an excitable, restless Scotsman, brimful of energy so that this somewhat perilous contract was entirely congenial." He bought two horses, bedecked himself in a scarlet coat and with the use of his loud-sounding horn (still to be seen at the Otago Early Settlers' Museum) he created a sensation wherever he went. There is a fine picture of him at the Early Settlers' labelled Jock Graham, Postman, Gabriel's Gully and Dunedin 1862 (see also O.D.T. Oct. 14, 1960).

In 1857 Jock Graham contracted to carry mails to Invercargill for £300 a year and continued until 1861 when James McIntosh started a coach service.

On June 12, 1858, the following notice was in the Otago Witness:—

Married at Caversham, Dunedin, Otago, by the Rev. Thomas Burns, John Graham, Mail Contractor, youngest son of the late William Graham esquire of Glasgow to Margaret, fifth daughter of James Marchbank, late of Moffat Dumfriesshire, Scotland.

Their first child was baptised Catherine McAra and in the Register Jock Graham is called an agriculturalist, owner of Dundas farm, Upper Wakari. My "family" source of information, Miss Ella Wade, grandniece of John Graham, says she was always told that Catherine McAra Grahamarried a Williams but I can find no verification of this. She records that Jock Graham had two more daughters, Anne (later Mrs McIntosh) and Mary (later Mrs Jack), and one son James who "lived on the Waimea plains and was killed driving cattle". He was married and had at least one daughter. I have not had an opportunity to trace any of these people, and hope that perhaps this article may be read by a descendant!

In 1861 Jock Graham was engaged by Mr A. Barr to carry mails to Gabriel's Gully, Wetherstones and other goldfields; and it seems he did this until Cobb & Co. took over. Mr W. R. Mayhew in "The Land and its People" tells how he was a welcome and popular figure. The "news hungry diggers" would eagerly barrow the Otago Witness at a fee of 1/- a night from the postman Jock Graham. His horn blowing noticeably decreased after the gibe of the Inimitable Thatcher in the Old Corinthian Hall Dunedin.

"Still dress your ancient postman in the style we daily see, His costume is essential to the Old Identity."

There is another story that his horn blown with gusto in the early morn aroused a drunkard who had fallen asleep in the old York Place Cemetery. " Heck, sirs ! It's the last trump. Whaur's James Macandrew? I'll gae with him," shouted the startled sleeper.

" When the rush to the West Coast set in," writes Mr Gilkison in " Early Days in Central Otago", the first diggers suffered greatly from the bush rats " .. The first cat available at Hokitika sold for £5 and John Graham conceived the idea of making a fortune by sending a load of cats to the diggings. He got Judge Bathgate to supply him with funds for the venture and bought 100 cats at 1/- a head. These he shipped to the West Coast but the venture was a disaster, because he was forstalled by the arrival of cats overland from Christchurch. Jock Graham, however, to the end of his days was proud of his association with Mr Bathgate and " boasted himself as a member of the late firm Bathgate and Graham, cat exporters."

Already in 1861 Jock Graham was using his pen. There are lively letters in the Otago Witness. One of July 27, 1861 recommends the Waipori route to the Goldfields which Jock had explored with a compass, taking six hours from Waipori to reach Gabriel's Gully. Another of October 1861 deplores that on the Goldfields the Sabbath is taken up with drinking, fighting and pig hunting. The Government was to be blamed for issuing licences, and should make a law about Sabbath breaking.

A useful piece of work which Jock did at this time was to work out and have printed his map or miners' Guide to the Goldfields. There is a copy of this in the Early Settlers' Hall and a photograph of it in Dr McLintock's " History of Otago."

John Graham's obituary in the O.D.T., November 24, 1904, says that when Cobb & Co. secured the mail contracts he took to selling cheap carcasses of mutton, commencing business first in the Commercial Saleyards in Rattray Street and then from a kind of stall in the Octagon.

He became very interested in politics and sought election to the Provincial Council as a foil to Mr J. G. S. Grant, another political eccentric. On 21st January, 1871, he sought a seat in the House of Representatives (to cause a diversion in favour of Mr Bathgate) but he got only 64 votes and Grant only 50. Then in June, 1873, he was a candidate for the Superintendency to split the votes between Macandrew and Gillies, but he got only 26 votes.

At the same time he was producing a weekly newspaper " Graham's Review of War, Politics, and Religion" Volume 1, number 6, dated 20th July, 1871, and priced 6d. is in the Hocken Library. It has a Scottish crest with a Latin motto as a heading. It contains Mr Graham's comment on the Mayoralty, prison labour, a new pottery industry, an article about a fraudulent attempt to fool people with talking machines and numerous advertisements. Volume 1 number 21 of 22nd December, 1871, is in the Otago Early Settlers' library. This is headed by a woodcut of J. G. S. Grant (his chief rival journalist whose " Saturday Review" seems to have had infinitely more success), seated backwards on a boar whilst being chased by Graham who brandishes his stick while his black cat arches its back and spits. This little paper gives very interesting information about industries in early Dunedin, and about a coach trip Jock had taken to Balclutha. It includes an advertisement for Hutton's Australasian Hotel, McLaggan Street "the editor's residence."

In February, 1872, Jock was rash enough to comment in his Review on the scandalous behaviour of a lady of the Opera. The lady turned out to be the wife of Signor Cagli himself and her behaviour was proved to be quite respectable and reasonable. Signor Cagli and Mr Smith, another member of the Opera, attacked Jock Graham as he stood in front of the Empire Hotel selling his papers, knocked him down and kicked him. Jock therefore brought an assault case against them (O.D.T., 10th February, 1872).

Signor Cagli was fined 1 farthing, while Mr Smith was fined 20 shillings and costs. The reporter however refers in the end to the " well-merited degradation of being publicly kicked in the street for a dastardly attack upon the character of a female by one who sold his vile trash at street corners."

This did not prevent Jock from standing for the Superintendency in June of the following year, but one wonders if his " Review " thrived much longer.

The next we hear of him is with the Otago Witness, 14th February, 1874, in an unkind article by Argus. This describes a lecture Jock was giving in Melbourne " Exposing Spiritism ". What seemed to bother Argus more than anything else was that Jock " put a money taker at the door then asked his audience for donations." Why he went to

Melbourne and how long he was there I cannot discover.

An appreciative article appears in the front page of the Otago Workman, 22nd March, 1890, an editorial entitled " Jock Graham." This records that "he dabbled in prophecy, a subject in which he gave the world the benefit of his learned reflections in a good-sized volume." He was a street orator and was interested also in theology (see also the caption for his picture in the Otago Witness, 26th April, 1921).

It must have been when he returned from Australia that he set up a bookstall near the old Railway Station and took to selling newspapers. The stall was advertised as being owned by John Graham, partner of the late firm of Bathgate and Co., Cat Exporters, Bookseller and Stationer. In the House of Many Colours (Gilkison " Early Days in Central Otago ") his stall was decorated with the legends of his doings on the Goldfields.

From this time he became increasingly crippled with rheumatism, caused by his hardships as mailman. He got to his stall on two sticks but finally had to be wheeled there in a kind of cart.

During the early eighties he went to Rotorua to see if the waters there would cure his rheumatism, but to no avail. He was, however, greatly delighted with his new Maori acquaintances whom he thought were more moral and " Christian " people than the Old Identities. So he said in his " Hot Springs Guide " in 1884 which he vended in the Arcade. A copy is in the possession of the Southland Times.

At this stage he must have become a pauper or at least unable to care for himself, for in 1886 he became an inmate of the Benevolent Institution. His campaigning spirit was not in any way deterred. In 1887 he put 50 inmates on a roll and got them all to the polling booth to vote. In 1889 (Otago Workman, 16th August) he proved himself "the most useful man here," according to another old man, for he detected that the milkman was watering down the milk, and had him brought to justice.

He was out and about at the Exhibition (1889-90) where his photo hung amongst the old identities. It is good to read in the Otago Workman of the interest he created.

His siser Catherine had died in 1870 and his brother-in-law soon after, but his unmarried sister Matilda, a very dignified lady who disassociated herself frOm him, did not die until 25th November, 1897. This was just seven years before his own death at the age of 87 in 1904. Apart from the crippling rheumatism Jock Graham enjoyed excellent health. He may have been a crank but he was a well-meaning one ; and he must have added spice to the early decades of Otago's history.